

# Averroës' *Takfīr* of al-Ghazālī: *Ta'wīl* and Causal *Kufr*

Saja Parvizian

## Bio note

Saja Parvizian is Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Coastal Carolina University. His primary research and teaching interests lie in early modern philosophy and classical Islamic philosophy.

## Abstract

Al-Ghazālī famously claims in the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* that al-Fārābī and Avicenna are unbelievers because they hold philosophical positions that conflict with Islam. What is less well-known, however, is that Averroës claims in the *Decisive Treatise* that al-Fārābī and Avicenna are not unbelievers; rather, al-Ghazālī is the true unbeliever for writing the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*. In this paper, my aim is to present a sustained reconstruction of Averroës' legal and philosophical argument for why al-Ghazālī is an unbeliever. The crux of Averroës' argument is that al-Ghazālī has expressed false allegorical interpretations of scripture to unqualified persons, which has caused them to fall into unbelief. By being causally responsible for other people's unbelief, al-Ghazālī is an unbeliever as well.

## Introduction

Is al-Ghazālī an unbeliever (*kāfir*)? To some, this question might seem misguided, offensive, or even heretical. Al-Ghazālī is supposed to be the 'Proof of Islam' (*ḥujjat al-Islām*) as he helped define orthodox Islam, bringing clarity to the religion in a time of much confusion and strife in the eleventh century. In his spiritual autobiography, *Deliverance from Error* (*al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*), al-Ghazālī describes how he defeated the philosophers, refuted misguided sects such as the Ta'limites, clarified Ash'arite theology, and experienced the realities of Sufism. Al-Ghazālī, then, must be a Muslim.<sup>1</sup>

So, how could such a question even be raised? In his infamous work, the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*), al-Ghazālī claims that the so-called 'Islamic philosophers' are *kuffār*:

I have seen a group who, believing themselves in possession of a distinctiveness from companion and peer by virtue of a superior quick wit and intelligence, have rejected the Islamic duties regarding acts of worship, disdained religious rites pertaining to the offices of prayer and the avoidance of prohibited things, belittled the devotions and ordinances prescribed by the divine law, not halting in the face of its prohibitions and restrictions. On the contrary, they have entirely cast off the reins of religion through multifarious beliefs, following therein a troop 'who turn

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<sup>1</sup> I employ the following abbreviations for primary texts: 'IP': *Incoherence of the Philosophers* [*Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*] (Tr. Marmura, cited by page); 'DC': *Decisive Criterion* [*Fayṣal al-Tafrīqah*] (Tr. Jackson, cited by page); 'DE': *Deliverance from Error* [*al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*] (Tr. McCarthy, cited by page); 'MB': *Moderation in Belief* [*al-Iqtisād fī al-I'tiqād*] (Tr. Yaqub, cited by page); 'DT': *Decisive Treatise* [*Faṣl al-Maqāl*] (Tr. Hourani, cited by page/Arabic drawn from the Butterworth edition); 'II': *Incoherence of the Incoherence* [*Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*] (Tr. Van den Bergh, cited by page); 'FR': *Faith and Reason* [*al-Kashf 'an Manāhij al-Adilla*] (Tr. Najjar, cited by page); 'Q': Qur'ān (Tr. Jones, cited by chapter and verse number).

[men] aside from the way of God and wish it to be crooked and who disbelieve (*kāfirūn*) in the world to come'. (IP: 2; Q. 11:19)

Al-Ghazālī's distal target is Aristotle—a *kāfir* by default—but his immediate concern is al-Fārābī and Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā).<sup>2</sup> According to al-Ghazālī, al-Fārābī and Avicenna are no more than “reliable transmitters and verifiers” of Aristotle, “their leader” (IP: 4; see also DE: 63). They are not doing anything philosophically novel, rather, they are merely regurgitating Aristotelian philosophy. As such, “there is no basis for their unbelief (*kufrihum*) other than traditional, conventional imitation (*taqlīd*)” (IP: 2).<sup>3</sup> Al-Ghazālī identifies twenty theses of the Islamic philosophers that are in tension with Islam. Seventeen of these theses are innovative (*bid'ā*) and thus heterodox; however, three of them are unorthodox and constitute unbelief (*kufr*) itself (IP: 10-11; DE: 66). According to al-Ghazālī in the *Decisive Criterion (Faysal al-Tafriqa)*, “unbelief (*kufr*) is to deem anything the Prophet brought to be a lie (*takdhīb*)” (DC: 92; see also MB: 199, 243-249). Thus, al-Ghazālī is claiming that three theses of al-Fārābī and Avicenna contradict, in a problematic way, what the Prophet said, which entails that they believe that the Prophet was a liar. These theses are: (1) the world is eternal, (2) God only knows universals and not particulars, and (3) there is no bodily resurrection (IP: 226). Thus, al-Fārābī and Avicenna are *kuffār* (DE: 66, DC: 109-110, MB: 244-245).<sup>4</sup>

However, al-Ghazālī did not have the final say on whether al-Fārābī and Avicenna were Muslims. Averroës (Ibn Rushd) systematically responds to al-Ghazālī in the *Incoherence of the Incoherence (Tahāfut al-Tahāfut)*, defending al-Fārābī and Avicenna. Although Averroës ultimately disagrees with many details of al-Fārābī and Avicenna's philosophical positions, he nonetheless attempts to dismantle al-Ghazālī's refutations, showing that he is confused about al-Fārābī and Avicenna's arguments, and ultimately too about the true Aristotelian positions on these theses.<sup>5</sup> Here, I am not concerned with this aspect of the debate, as there is a growing literature on al-Ghazālī's refutations and Averroës' counterarguments.<sup>6</sup> Instead, I want to draw attention to a neglected claim that Averroës makes in the *Decisive Treatise (Faṣl al-Maqāl)*, namely, that al-Fārābī and Avicenna are not *kuffār*; rather, al-Ghazālī is the true *kāfir* simply because he wrote the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*.

In the *Decisive Treatise*, Averroës argues for a novel criterion for being a *kāfir*: if someone is causally responsible for another person committing *kufr*, then they are by extension a

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<sup>2</sup> In the *Deliverance from Error*, al-Ghazālī clearly claims that Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates are *kuffār*: ‘they all must be taxed with unbelief’ (DE: 62-3).

<sup>3</sup> For an account of al-Ghazālī's conception of *taqlīd* as an inferior form of knowledge, see Griffel (2005). For a discussion of whether al-Ghazālī really rejects Avicenna's philosophy, see Janssens (2001). For an account of Avicenna's reception of Aristotle, see Gutas (1988: 149-158). Al-Ghazālī also claims that al-Fārābī and Avicenna do not practice basic Islamic rituals. Averroës denies this in the *Incoherence of the Incoherence*, claiming that the Islamic philosophers do not dismiss the Islamic rituals (II: 359).

<sup>4</sup> Al-Ghazālī's *Incoherence of the Philosophers* undoubtedly had a profound impact on the trajectory of Islamic philosophy. Commentators are divided, however, on whether al-Ghazālī caused a decline in Islamic philosophy. For commentators who claim that al-Ghazālī caused a decline, see Munk (1859: 2:512); Renan (1852: 22-4); and Watt (1962: 117). For commentators who claim that al-Ghazālī did not cause a decline, or at least that such a view is exaggerated, see Griffel (2009); Leaman (2008); Pines (1937: 80); and Sabra (1987).

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Averroës actually thinks that the alleged proofs of al-Fārābī and Avicenna, like al-Ghazālī's, fail to meet demonstrative standards. Thus he claims that the *Incoherence of the Incoherence* could have equally been called the ‘Incoherence of both parties together’ (II: 258).

<sup>6</sup> For discussions of al-Fārābī and Avicenna's original arguments, see Butterworth (1992); Marmura (1960, 1962); McGinnis (2014); and Vallat (2011). For al-Ghazālī's refutations of al-Fārābī and Avicenna, see Bahlul (1992); Dougherty (2008); Griffel (2009); and Moad (2015a, 2015b). For Averroës' counterarguments, see Belo (2006); Bello (1989); Fakhry (2001); Kukkonen (2000); and Leaman (1988).

*kāfir* as well. Call this ‘causal *kufr*’. According to Averroës, by writing the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* as a popular book—that is, a text written in a rhetorical and dialectical style—al-Ghazālī exposed (false) allegorical interpretations (s. *ta’wīl*, pl. *ta’wīlāt*) of scripture to the masses, and thus became responsible for mass *kufr*, particularly amongst the rhetorical and dialectical classes of believers.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, al-Ghazālī is a *kāfir*.<sup>8</sup>

It must be stressed that Averroës is using the term ‘*kāfir*’, as applied to al-Ghazālī, in a unique and certainly odd sense. On the standard view, a *kāfir* is someone who, at the cognitive level, has problematic beliefs in relation to Islam (Izutsu 2004: 135-144).<sup>9</sup> Call this ‘cognitive *kufr*’. Indeed, this is how al-Ghazālī understands ‘*kufr*’: it is to deem—i.e. believe or judge—that the Prophet lied about something.<sup>10</sup> As we will see, Averroës has a novel analysis of cognitive *kufr*, which bears a unique relation to his account of causal *kufr*. For Averroës, cognitive *kufr* is indexed to one’s intellectual capacities, and thus there are varying epistemic norms for *kufr*. Cognitive *kufr* for someone of the rhetorical or dialectical class is not necessarily cognitive *kufr* for someone of the demonstrative class (i.e. the philosopher). Roughly put, while someone from the rhetorical class ought not deny apparent meanings in scripture, the philosopher is obligated to deny apparent meanings in favor of allegorical meanings. The reason why al-Ghazālī is a *kāfir*, however, is not because he commits cognitive *kufr*. Indeed, Averroës implies that al-Ghazālī’s assent to false allegorical interpretations in the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* is not what makes him a *kāfir*. There are excusing conditions for the theoretical errors of the scholars. Rather, al-Ghazālī is a *kāfir* because he has led those who are unqualified to engage in allegorical interpretation, which is cognitive *kufr* for them.<sup>11</sup> These distinctions will be explained in more detail below. The point of stressing Averroës’ unique usage of ‘*kāfir*’ at the outset is so that we do not expect Averroës to argue that al-Ghazālī is a *kāfir* because he argues for false allegorical interpretations. When Averroës claims that al-Ghazālī is a *kāfir*, he has this specific non-cognitive sense of *kufr* (causal *kufr*) in mind.

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<sup>7</sup> While many of the details of this argument in the *Decisive Treatise* have been discussed by commentators, to the best of my knowledge, there is only one commentator who explicitly acknowledges that Averroës claims that al-Ghazālī is a *kāfir*, namely, Iysa Bello. His discussion is limited to a couple paragraphs, in which he writes: ‘Ibn Rushd pronounces Ghazālī to be “an unbeliever on account of his summoning people to unbelief” by expressing false allegorical interpretations concerning the principles of Islam to the masses in rhetorical and dialectical books’ (1989: 71). Catarina Belo also acknowledges the causal claim, but she does not explicitly draw out Averroës’ conclusion that al-Ghazālī is a *kāfir*; rather, she links it to the Ash‘arites (2013: 34; cf. 2016: 288-9). Neither commentator reconstructs the details of the causal claim. For general discussions of the *Decisive Treatise*, see Belo (2016); Heller-Roezan (2006); and Mahdi (1994).

<sup>8</sup> Averroës makes a separate claim that al-Ghazālī was wrong to call al-Fārābī and Avicenna *kuffār* given al-Ghazālī’s own criteria for *kufr* in the *Decisive Criterion* (DT: 53). I will not address in any detail the differences between Averroës and al-Ghazālī’s conceptions of *kufr*, as my aim is to focus on Averroës’ account in the *Decisive Treatise*. For a discussion of the differences between Averroës and al-Ghazālī, see Griffel (2002).

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed account of different senses of ‘*kufr*’, see Brentjes (2016).

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Averroës comes fairly close to affirming this kind of view of cognitive *kufr* in the *Incoherence of the Incoherence*: ‘if he expresses a doubt concerning the religious principles in which he has been brought up, or explains them in a way contradictory to the prophets and turns away from their path, he merits more than anyone else that the term unbeliever should be applied to him’ (II: 360). This statement is not inconsistent with the analysis of cognitive *kufr* in the *Decisive Treatise*, as explained below. Averroës modulates al-Ghazālī’s conception of *kufr* by arguing that what it means to say the Prophet is a liar will shift depending on one’s intellectual capacities.

<sup>11</sup> As will be explained below, al-Ghazālī would still be causally responsible for causal *kufr* obtaining amongst the masses even if his allegorical interpretations were *true*. This is because the rhetorical and dialectical class should not engage in allegorical interpretation at all.

Some important clarifications about the aims and scope of this paper. The primary aim of this paper—getting Averroës’ neglected argument up and running—is more philosophical than historical in orientation. Of course, there are many historical questions that can be raised about Averroës’ condemnation (*takfīr*) of al-Ghazālī. For example, how was Averroës’ *takfīr* received by his contemporaries? Did al-Ghazālī actually cause the masses to fall into *kufr*? For the most part, I will not deal with these sorts of questions. My goal is to provide a sustained philosophical reconstruction of Averroës’ *takfīr*, by fleshing out his account of causal *kufr*. Finally, I will not provide an independent answer to the question of whether al-Ghazālī is a *kāfir*, as I believe to do so properly would take us beyond the scope of the present project.

The paper is divided up as follows. In the next section, I first explain Averroës’ account of the status of philosophy in relation to the law. This argument is standard fare for those familiar with the *Decisive Treatise*, but I replicate it here (in broad strokes) as it is foundational to understanding Averroës’ *takfīr*. I then examine Averroës’ account of allegorical interpretation of scripture. I focus on the scope and norms for allegorical interpretation, and distinguish the three classes of believers. Finally, I reconstruct Averroës’ account of causal *kufr*, and identify three interrelated senses of causal responsibility involved in causal *kufr*: evidential responsibility, epistemic responsibility, and moral responsibility. With this framework in place, I explain exactly how al-Ghazālī can cause an unqualified person to fall into cognitive *kufr*. I close with an analysis of how philosophy and religion are ‘milk-sisters’, and a brief defense of al-Ghazālī.

### **Averroës *Takfīr***

Averroës’ *takfīr* of al-Ghazālī consists of the following argument:

1. Anyone who expresses allegorical interpretations (true or false) to unqualified persons is a *kāfir*.
  2. Al-Ghazālī expresses false allegorical interpretations to unqualified persons in the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*.
- ∴ Al-Ghazālī is a *kāfir*.

The argument is valid. The justification of these premises, however, is a complicated story. The crux of the argument is premise (1). Though I will minimally explain why Averroës is committed to premise (2), let us grant him this premise. This is because explaining why Averroës thinks that al-Ghazālī presents false allegorical interpretations is a further project on its own, requiring (1) examination of Averroës’ counterarguments in the *Incoherence of the Incoherence* and (2) empirical evidence that unqualified persons were actually exposed to al-Ghazālī’s false allegorical interpretations. Thus, my focus will be on premise (1), which is justified by Averroës’ account of causal *kufr*. To unpack causal *kufr* we must understand the norms for allegorical interpretation of scripture, that is, who is and is not qualified to engage in allegorical interpretation.

### *Falsafah* and *Sharī‘ah*

Our point of departure is Averroës’ conception of philosophy (*falsafa*), and its status in Islamic law (*sharī‘a*).<sup>12</sup> According to Averroës, philosophy is “nothing more than the study of existing beings (*al-mawjūdāt*) and reflection on them as indications of the Artisan (*al-ṣāni‘*)” (DT: 44). If the law urges us to reflect on existent beings, then philosophical inquiry is either obligatory

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<sup>12</sup> For accounts of Averroës’ views on *sharī‘ah*, see Yildiz (2016) and Taylor (2012).

(*wājib*) or recommended (*mandūb*). Averroës cites numerous verses in the Qur’ān that call to such a reflection.<sup>13</sup> For example:

Reflect, those of you who have eyes. (Q. 59:2)

Do they not consider the camels and how they have been created, and the heaven and how it was raised? (Q. 88:17-18; see also Q. 7:185; 6:75)

According to Averroës, such verses show that philosophy is obligatory: “the Law has rendered obligatory the study of beings by the intellect (*al-nazr bi-l-‘aql*) and reflection on them” (DT: 45).<sup>14</sup> The kind of philosophy that the Qur’ān calls to can be viewed as encompassing all branches of philosophy, both theoretical and practical. However, Averroës seems to have in mind specifically metaphysics, for he claims that the Qur’ān is calling us to reflect on the nature of existent beings insofar as they are indications of the existence and nature of God.<sup>15</sup>

Averroës’ next step is to identify the best method for conducting philosophy: “we are under an obligation to carry on our study of beings by intellectual reasoning (*bi-l-qiyās al-‘aqlī*)” (DT: 45). But since philosophy is “the most perfect kind of study” it must employ “the most perfect kind of reasoning”, that is, “demonstration” (*burhān*). Mastery of demonstrative reasoning requires us to know the different kinds of syllogisms and the conditions for their validity and invalidity, and how demonstrative reasoning is different from “dialectical, rhetorical, and fallacious reasoning” (ibid.).<sup>16</sup>

How exactly should we go about learning logic? Averroës claims that “it is difficult or impossible for one man to find out by himself and from the beginning all that he needs of that subject” (ibid.). It would be imprudent, then, to try to reinvent the wheel when it comes to logic. Instead, “we ought to seek help towards our goal from what has been said by such a predecessor on the subject, regardless of whether this other one shares our religion or not” (DT: 46-7). Averroës has in mind ancient philosophers, particularly Aristotle, who have identified the various kinds of syllogisms and established standards for their validity and invalidity. But this does not mean that we should blindly follow ancient logicians. Rather, we should accept what is correct from their work, reject what is incorrect, and more importantly, try to make progress in the study of logic (DT: 47).

After having mastered logic, we are in a position to engage in philosophical inquiry. Here too, however, it would be imprudent to start from scratch. Just as in logic, we also need to look to ancient philosophers:

[W]henver we find in the works of our predecessors of former nations a theory about beings and a reflection on them conforming to what the conditions of demonstration require, we ought to study what they said about the matter and what they argued in their books. (DT: 48)

Averroës makes a strong claim regarding the study of ancient philosophy: “it is evident that the study of the books of the ancients is obligatory by Law, since their aim and purpose in their books is just the purpose to which the Law has urged us” (ibid.). Muslims must study, at the very

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<sup>13</sup> In the *Decisive Treatise*, Averroës is primarily concerned with the relationship between philosophy and the law (*sharī‘a*). However, ‘law’ seems to be a general term referring to law and its textual sources (Qur’ān and *hadīth*). Thus, Hourani also translates ‘*sharī‘a*’ as ‘scripture’ as well. For our purposes, I do not see any significant differences here. I will use ‘law’, ‘scripture’, and ‘Qur’ān’ interchangeably.

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed account of why Averroës thinks that philosophy is obligatory, see Leaman (1988: 144-160).

<sup>15</sup> Though Averroës comes close, he does not claim that since philosophy is obligatory, rejecting philosophy is *kufr*. Why this is the case will be made clear below. Al-Kindī, however, does draw out this implication. For a discussion of al-Kindī on the relationship between philosophy and Islam, see Adamson (2007: 22-25) and Janssens (2007).

<sup>16</sup> For an account of medieval Islamic conceptions of syllogisms, see Lameer (1994).

least, the works of Plato and Aristotle. However, the study of ancient philosophy, and philosophy more generally, is obligatory only for “anyone who is fit to study them”, that is, Muslims who unite two qualities: “natural intelligence” and “religious integrity and moral virtue” (ibid.). Preventing a person who meets these qualifications from studying philosophy would be to block them from the “door of theoretical study that leads to the truest knowledge (*ḥaqq al-ma’rifa*) of Him” (ibid.). However, like the study of ancient logic, we should not blindly follow the ancients in their metaphysical positions. We should accept what accords with demonstrative reasoning, reject what does not, and make progress in metaphysics.

### *Burhān and Ta’wīl*

For Averroës, *sharī’a* sanctions philosophy as an independent theoretical activity: philosophical truths can be identified without consulting, say, the Qur’ān.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, if qualified, one is obligated to seek this distinct avenue to truth. But what about the claims the Qur’ān makes about existent beings? What should the Islamic philosopher do when confronted with a different metaphysical framework in the Qur’ān? According to Averroës, while there may be *prima facie* conflicts between philosophy and scripture, there cannot be *ultima facie* conflicts:

[W]e, the Muslim community, know firmly that demonstrative reflection does not lead to differing with what is set down in the Law. For truth does not oppose truth; rather, it agrees with and bears witness to it. (DT: 50)

There cannot be any real contradictions between philosophy and scripture, because demonstrative truth is not essentially different from scriptural truth. Scriptural claims are subject to the same epistemic standards as philosophical claims.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, it does seem that philosophy contradicts scripture. How, then, do we reconcile apparent tensions?

The demonstrative truths that philosophy identifies can relate to scripture in two ways. First, scripture might be silent about an existent revealed by demonstration. This is not a problem: “if it is unmentioned there is no contradiction” (ibid.); one can simply accept the demonstrative truth about the existent. However, if scripture does mention an existent, there are two possible scenarios: “If Scripture speaks about it, the apparent meaning of the words inevitably either accords or conflicts with the conclusions of demonstration about it” (ibid.). If the apparent meaning of scripture is in accordance with a demonstrative truth, there is also no problem because scripture is straightforwardly confirming the demonstrative truth. However, if the apparent meaning of scripture *prima facie* conflicts with a demonstrative truth about an existent, then there is a tension. In such a case, Averroës claims scripture must be interpreted allegorically. Averroës defines “allegorical interpretation” as follows:

The meaning of ‘allegorical interpretation’ (*al-ta’wīl*) is: extension of the significance of an expression from real to metaphorical significance, without forsaking therein the standard metaphorical practices of Arabic, such as calling a thing by the name of something resembling it or a cause or consequence or accompaniment of it, or other things such as are enumerated in accounts of the kinds of metaphorical speech. (ibid.)

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<sup>17</sup> I am disagreeing with Strauss’ view on the relationship between philosophy and the law. According to Strauss, philosophy is not a freely sanctioned activity for Averroës; rather, it is bound by the law (1995: 88). As I understand Averroës, however, philosophical truths can be accepted without reference to the law.

<sup>18</sup> For further discussion of the principle that ‘truth does not oppose truth’, see Taylor (2000) and Fakhry (1968).

An allegorical interpretation provides a metaphorical reading of a text, in conformity with the proper norms for metaphorical expression in Arabic.<sup>19</sup> The aim is to provide a metaphorical reading of scripture that will agree with a particular demonstrative truth. For example, there are verses in the Qur’ān that make reference to God’s hands (Q. 48:10). A literal reading is philosophically problematic, because it would ascribe corporeality to God and make God similar to creation (Q. 42:11). Thus, one should allegorically interpret references to the hands of God as an expression of, say, God’s power. Such allegorical interpretations are in part justified, because an allegorical interpretation of one part of scripture will always be confirmed or almost confirmed by the apparent meaning of another part of scripture:

[I]f scripture is considered carefully, and the rest of its contents searched page by page, there will invariably be found among the expressions of Scripture something that in its apparent meaning bears witness to that allegorical interpretation or comes close to bearing witness. (DT: 51)

But this raises an important question: why did God not reveal scripture in a way such that it literally expresses all demonstrative truths?

There are two interrelated reasons for why scripture conceals demonstrative truths. First, the contradiction between apparent meanings in scripture is a pedagogical device intended by God:

The reason why we have received in Scripture texts whose apparent meanings contradict each other is in order to draw the attention of those who are well grounded in science (*al-‘ilm*) to the interpretation (*al-ta’wīl*) that reconciles them. (Ibid.)

By having *prima facie* contradictions, scripture is designed to steer those who are qualified—i.e. “well-grounded in science”—to the allegorical interpretations that reconcile the tension. Second, the presence of apparent meanings is required because they are suited to the intellectual capacities of those who are not grounded in science, and thus cannot assent to allegorical interpretations. To understand this second reason, we must discuss the scope and norms of allegorical interpretation.

According to Averroës, everyone agrees that allegorical interpretation of scripture is a valid practice (DT: 51). The point of contention is the scope of allegorical interpretation; that is, which verses admit of allegorical interpretation, and which verses do not (ibid.). One solution is to follow consensus (*ijmā’*) amongst the Muslim community regarding the scope of allegorical interpretation:

It may be objected: ‘There are some things in Scripture that the Muslims have unanimously agreed to take in their apparent meaning, others [that they have agreed] to interpret allegorically, and others about which they have disagreed; is it permissible, then, that demonstration should lead to interpreting allegorically

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<sup>19</sup> A point of interest here is that Averroës seems to accept al-Ghazālī’s rule for allegorical interpretation: “the rule to follow in this type of speculation is the one Abu Ḥāmid adopted in *The Book of Distinction* (i.e. *Decisive Criterion*)” (FR: 129-130). What Averroës is specifically referring to is al-Ghazālī’s distinction between five levels of existence indicated in scripture, and how one might be justified—via proof—to move from one kind of existence to the next through allegorical interpretation (DC: 96-107; see also DT: 59). The disagreement between al-Ghazālī and Averroës is whether the philosophers’ ‘proofs’ justify them in offering allegorical interpretations of higher levels of existence. For discussion of al-Ghazālī’s rule for allegorical interpretation, see Griffel (2015); Kemal (2003: 207-220); and Moosa (2005: 191-208).

what they have agreed to take in its apparent meaning, or to taking in its apparent meaning what they have agreed to interpret allegorically?’ (DT: 52)

A worry raised in this passage is that philosophical inquiry will conflict with consensus by leading the philosopher to allegorical interpretations about verses in scripture that should be taken in their apparent meaning. In principle, Averroës accepts *ijmā’* (ibid.).<sup>20</sup> However, he claims that unlike practical matters (*al-‘amaliyyāt*), “unanimity on theoretical matters (*al-nazariyyāt*) is never determined with certainty” (ibid.). Averroës justifies this claim as follows:

[I]t is not possible for unanimity to be determined on any question at any period unless that period is strictly limited by us, and all the scholars (*al-‘ulamā’*) existing in that period are known to us (that is, known as individuals and in their total number), and the doctrine of each of them on the question has been handed down to us on unassailable authority, and, in addition to all this, unless we are sure that the scholars existing at the time were in agreement that there is not both an apparent and an inner meaning in Scripture, that knowledge of any question ought not to be kept secret from anyone, and that there is only one way for people to understand Scripture. (ibid.)

To establish consensus about whether and how to allegorically interpret scripture three conditions must hold. First, we must know who all the scholars are that have taken an interpretive stance on a given theoretical text. Second, we must know their interpretive stance on that theoretical text. Third, it must be the case that the scholars agree that allegorical interpretations of theoretical texts should not be kept secret from anyone. With regard to the first and second conditions, Averroës thinks they are epistemically impossible to establish, because there always might be some scholar and their allegorical interpretation that escapes us. At first glance, the third condition might not seem relevant. However, in order to establish consensus in the Muslim community about a theoretical matter, it must be the case that the scholars thought that allegorical interpretations should not be kept secret from anyone.<sup>21</sup> Allegorical interpretations must be available to everyone, both scholars and laymen, in order to establish consensus. Averroës says this condition cannot be met:

[I]t is recorded in Tradition that many of the first believers used to hold that Scripture has both an apparent and an inner meaning (*ẓāhir wa bāṭin*), and that the inner meaning ought not to be learned by anyone who is not a man of learning in this field and who is incapable of understanding it. (ibid.)

Consensus cannot be established if the scholars believe that the true inner meanings should only be expressed to a select, qualified few.

We are now in a position to fully explain the second reason why scripture does not express all demonstrative truths in an apparent manner. In short, it is because God has designed scripture to appeal to a diverse range of intellectual capacities:

The reason why we have received a Scripture with both an apparent and an inner meaning lies in the diversity of people’s natural capacities and the difference of their innate dispositions with regard to assent. (DT: 51)

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<sup>20</sup> For an account of consensus in Islam, see Hamid Ali (2010).

<sup>21</sup> Averroës is unclear about whether consensus is amongst the Muslim community as a whole, or just the scholars. As I read him here, consensus must hold amongst the Muslim community, which includes scholars and laymen. This explains the third condition: consensus cannot be established in the Muslim community because inner meanings are not disclosed to laymen.



According to Averroës, “the purpose of Scripture is to teach true science and right practice,” which is primarily done through demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetorical judgments. Most people however, given their limited intellectual capacities, are not suited to the demonstrative method. And “since it is the purpose of Scripture simply to teach everyone” (DT: 64), the most common methods present in scripture are dialectical and rhetorical. This is not problematic, because God has “appointed for every Muslim by the method of assent (*al-tasḍīq*) that his temperament and nature require” (DT: 49). Believers, then, must assent to an understanding of scripture that is appropriate to their intellectual capacities. Some must assent to apparent meanings, while others must assent to some combination of apparent and inner meanings.

Averroës thus distinguishes three classes of believers, based on their methods of assent (DT: 65). First, the rhetorical class (*al-khiṭābiyūn*) consists of laymen, who are swayed by rhetoric and imagistic representations. They must only assent to apparent meanings.<sup>22</sup> Second, the dialectical class (*al-jidliyyūn*) are the theologians, who “either by nature alone or by nature and habit” have a better understanding of scripture because they are using a higher form of argumentation (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, they too must assent to apparent meanings, and ought not engage in allegorical interpretation via dialectic. Third, there is the demonstrative class (*al-burhāniyyūn*) who “by nature and training” are qualified to engage in allegorical interpretation (*ibid.*). These are the scholars and philosophers, whose allegorical interpretations “ought not to be expressed to the dialectical class, let alone to the masses” (*ibid.*).

### *Causal Kufr*

Here are the facts on the ground: there is a disagreement between al-Ghazālī, al-Fārābī, and Avicenna about certain allegorical interpretations of scripture. For Averroës, these disagreements are not problematic. This is because, as we saw above, there is no sound consensus about the right allegorical interpretations, and “we ought not to call a man an unbeliever for violating unanimity in cases of allegorical interpretation, because no unanimity is conceivable in such cases” (DT: 53). Moreover, it is also not problematic that one or more of these scholars might be wrong in their allegorical interpretation (DT: 60). Indeed, Averroës thinks that all three philosophers are ultimately in error, although al-Fārābī and Avicenna are closer to the truth. According to Averroës, “it seems that those who disagree on the interpretation of these difficult questions earn merit if they are in the right and will be excused [by God] if they are in error” (DT: 57).

However, while error concerning allegorical interpretation is excused for the demonstrative class, it is not excused for any other class of people (whether it concerns theoretical or practical matters). The claim is not that unqualified persons are not excused for giving false allegorical interpretations. Rather, the claim is that unqualified persons should not engage in allegorical interpretation at all. As Averroës writes: “he who makes judgments about beings without having the proper qualifications for [such] judgments is not excused but is either a sinner or an unbeliever” (DT: 58).

More specifically, Averroës distinguishes three types of scriptural texts, and the conditions for being excused or blamed for error about them (*ibid.*). First, there are texts that must be taken in their apparent meaning by everyone irrespective of class. These are texts concerning practical matters and principles of religion (*uṣūl al-dīn*), for example, that prayer is obligatory and that there is happiness in the next life (DT: 59). The apparent and true meaning of

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<sup>22</sup> See Kemal (2003: 224) for Averroës’ views on rhetoric, dialectic, and demonstration.

these texts can be understood plainly by all three classes, thus allegorical interpretation about them is blameworthy. Second, there are theoretical texts that must be taken in their apparent meaning by the rhetorical and dialectical classes but must be interpreted allegorically by the demonstrative class. It is blameworthy for the rhetorical and dialectical classes to interpret them allegorically, and blameworthy for the demonstrative class to take them in their apparent meaning (ibid.). Third, there are texts whose status is unclear as falling under the first two types above, thus literal or allegorical interpretation of these texts by a qualified scholar of the demonstrative class is allowed, and excused if it is erroneous (DT: 60).

By establishing unique epistemic obligations for each kind of believer, Averroës implicitly offers a novel conception of cognitive *kufṛ* with respect to theoretical matters. No believer, regardless of class, can deny practical matters and principles of religion. However, when it comes to theoretical matters, cognitive *kufṛ*—and correspondingly faith or belief (*imān*)—is indexed to one’s intellectual capacities. While it would be cognitive *kufṛ* for a person of the rhetorical class to deny an apparent meaning of a theoretical text, it is not cognitive *kufṛ* for a scholar to deny the apparent meaning of that text in favor of an allegorical interpretation. Thus if one were to ask Averroës, ‘what is *kufṛ* with respect to theoretical matters?’, he would not respond like al-Ghazālī does, by enumerating a list of theoretical beliefs that contradict the Qur’ān. Rather, he would first identify what kind of believer the questioner is based on their intellectual capacities, and then proceed from there to identify what that believer should assent to.<sup>23</sup> In addition to these variable norms, it is important to note that, for Averroës, cognitive *kufṛ* with respect to theoretical matters does not track falsity. That is, a theoretical belief is not *kufṛ* because it is false (although it may be false). A philosopher can assent to false allegorical interpretations, and still be a Muslim. Indeed, although Averroës defends al-Fārābī and Avicenna’s status as Muslims, he is clear that they are wrong in many of their philosophical positions. Moreover, the rhetorical and dialectical classes are obligated to assent to apparent meanings of theoretical texts which are, strictly speaking, false by demonstrative standards.

The upshot, then, is that Averroës actually has no problem with there being a difference of opinion between al-Ghazālī, al-Fārābī, and Avicenna about the three theses. What is problematic, however, is that al-Ghazālī exposed his allegorical interpretations of the creation of the world, God’s knowledge, resurrection and so on in a popular book—the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*—accessible to believers from the rhetorical and dialectical classes.<sup>24</sup> It must be emphasized that Averroës’ worry is not that al-Ghazālī exposed false allegorical interpretations. He would be equally guilty if he exposed true ones: “true allegories ought not to be set down in popular books, let alone false ones” (CT: 68). Given that members of the rhetorical and dialectical classes are obligated to assent to apparent meanings, allegorical interpretations should be expressed only in demonstrative books, and these demonstrative books should not be made available to the unqualified. By writing about allegorical interpretations in a popular book, the scholar does something quite pernicious. That is, he leads unqualified persons to cognitive *kufṛ*. By doing this the scholar becomes a *kāfir* as well. This is premise (1) of our master argument. Recall that it states that “anyone who expresses allegorical interpretations (true or false) to unqualified persons is a *kāfir*.” As Averroës puts it:

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<sup>23</sup> For an account of theological beliefs that everyone must hold according to Averroës, see Mensia (2019: 31-37).

<sup>24</sup> Al-Ghazālī discusses allegorical interpretations in a number of his books. However, it is clear that Averroës has the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* in mind when he speaks of a ‘popular book’ of al-Ghazālī, because in the *Decisive Treatise* he is responding primarily to al-Ghazālī’s *takfīr* in the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (DT: 53).

But anyone who is not a man of learning is obliged to take these passages in their apparent meaning, and allegorical interpretation of them is for him unbelief because it leads to unbelief. That is why we hold that, for anyone whose duty it is to believe in the apparent meaning, allegorical interpretation is unbelief, because it leads to unbelief. Anyone of the interpretative class who discloses such [an interpretation] to him is summoning him to unbelief, and he who summons to unbelief is an unbeliever. (DT: 61)

Averroës justifies premise (1) with two interrelated definitions of *kufr*. The first kind of *kufr* is of the cognitive variety. Call it ‘local *kufr*’.<sup>25</sup> More specifically:

Local *Kufr*: If an unqualified person, *U*, engages in allegorical interpretation, then *U* commits cognitive *kufr* and is a *kāfir*.<sup>26</sup>

In local *kufr*, the unqualified person who engages in allegorical interpretation is a *kāfir* in the cognitive sense, i.e. they commit cognitive *kufr*. The second kind of *kufr* is parasitic on the first kind. Call it ‘causal *kufr*’. More specifically:

Causal *Kufr*: If a qualified person, *Q*, exposes allegorical interpretations to an unqualified person, *U*, then *Q* is a *kāfir*, because *Q* is causally responsible for local *kufr* obtaining in *U*.<sup>27</sup>

The qualified person who exposes allegorical interpretations to an unqualified person is a *kāfir* in a non-cognitive—i.e. causal—sense. The astute reader, however, will note that Averroës does not use causal language in the passage above. All he says is that summoning someone to *kufr* makes one a *kāfir*. Similarly, Averroës writes:

[H]e is an unbeliever on account of his summoning (*da ‘ā*) people to unbelief (*al-kufr*). (DT: 66)

[He] who turns people away (*al-ṣād*) from Scripture is an unbeliever (*kāfir*). (DT: 67)

Though not explicit, there are causal connotations to the Arabic terms used here for ‘summoning’ and ‘turning away’.<sup>28</sup> For example, *al-ṣād* also means repelling or driving away. Moreover, for systematic and charitable reasons, the best reading of ‘summoning to unbelief’ is ‘causing unbelief’. Mere summoning—e.g. pronouncing an allegorical interpretation to an

<sup>25</sup> In denoting this kind of cognitive *kufr* as ‘local’, my intention is to capture the sense in which this kind of *kufr* obtains for one person, as opposed to obtaining from a relation between two people (as in causal *kufr*).

<sup>26</sup> What does it mean to ‘engage’ in allegorical interpretation? Averroës is not clear. There are three possibilities: (1) offering one’s own allegorical interpretations, (2) studying allegorical interpretations, and (3) reading about allegorical interpretations. My speculation is that Averroës has in mind (1) and (2); he would not think that mere reading of allegorical interpretations would automatically make one a *kāfir*.

<sup>27</sup> There is one place in the *Decisive Treatise* where Averroës seems to imply that the scholar who exposes allegorical interpretations to unqualified persons falls into cognitive *kufr* as well: “both he who expresses it and he to whom it is expressed are led into unbelief” (DT: 66). However, I think Averroës is misspeaking here, for as we will see below, it is clear that there is no change in the scholar’s beliefs. The only sense in which the scholar commits cognitive *kufr* is that he has caused cognitive *kufr* to obtain in another person. What Averroës should have said is that the “one who expresses the allegorical interpretation, and the one to whom it is expressed become *kuffār*.”

<sup>28</sup> There exists one text, however, where Averroës uses explicit causal language in describing what al-Ghazālī has done: “But by expressing those false beliefs to the masses, they have been a cause (*sababā*) of perdition to the masses and themselves, in this world and the next” (DT: 66). Since the reason for the perdition of the masses in this life and the next would be their unbelief, if al-Ghazālī is the cause of their perdition, this must be vis-à-vis his being the cause of their falling into unbelief. Such a text, coupled with the analysis of what *summoning to unbelief* amounts to below, provides good evidence that Averroës does ascribe to causal *kufr*.

unqualified person—is too weak a condition for being a *kāfir*. A scholar has to do more work. What exactly that is will be explained in detail below.

How exactly do local *kufr* and causal *kufr* obtain? Regarding local *kufr*, Averroës writes: When something of these allegorical interpretations is expressed to anyone unfit to receive them—especially demonstrative interpretations because of their remoteness from common knowledge—both he who expresses it and he to whom it is expressed are led into unbelief. The reason for that [in the case of the latter] is that allegorical interpretation comprises two things, rejection (*ibṭāl*) of the apparent meaning and affirmation (*ithbāt*) of the allegorical one; so that if the apparent meaning is rejected in the mind of someone who can only grasp apparent meanings, without the allegorical meaning being armed in his mind, the result is unbelief (*al-kufr*), if it [the text in question] concerns the principles of religion. (DT: 66; see also DT: 61)

We can disambiguate three different ways in which local *kufr* obtains. First, in this passage, Averroës claims that engaging in allegorical interpretation leads to a destruction of appropriate belief for a person of the rhetorical or dialectical class. Here is how it works. Assenting to an allegorical interpretation involves two cognitive acts: (1) the *rejection* of the apparent meaning of a text, and (2) the *affirmation* of the allegorical meaning. In the ideal case—that is, the case of the philosopher or qualified student—the apparent meaning is rejected and replaced by an allegorical meaning via demonstration. However, if someone is unfit to understand the allegorical meaning—they are not trained in logic—then their initial belief in the apparent meaning of scripture, one that was appropriate to their intellectual capacities, has been destroyed, and no appropriate belief has been put in its place. I think this is the primary sense in which local *kufr* obtains. Indeed, Averroës has this sense in mind when discussing God’s self-knowledge in the Sixth Discussion of the *Incoherence of the Incoherence*:

The problem concerning the knowledge of the Creator of Himself and of other things is one of those questions which it is forbidden to discuss in a dialectical way, let alone put them down in a book, for the understanding of the masses does not suffice to understand such subtleties, and when one embarks on such problems with them the meaning of divinity becomes void (*baṭala*) for them and therefore it is forbidden to them to occupy themselves with this knowledge, since it suffices for their blessedness to understand what is within their grasp. (II: 215)

However, I think that there are two other ways that local *kufr* can obtain on the rejection-affirmation model. Second, it is possible that the apparent meaning is rejected and the allegorical meaning armed; however, the allegorical meaning is neither understood nor justified by demonstration. Third, it is possible that the apparent meaning is rejected and the allegorical meaning affirmed; however, while the allegorical meaning is understood, it cannot be demonstrated. Though he does not make it explicit, I think that Averroës wavers between these three options in the *Decisive Treatise*. This is not inconsistent. All three options amount to local *kufr*, because an epistemic norm is being violated. We should, then, take a disjunctive approach: the way that local *kufr* obtains will depend on the kind of believer that is attempting the allegorical interpretation.

Let us now turn to how causal *kufr* obtains. We must start off by noting that there is no corresponding cognitive exchange when causal *kufr* obtains. Although the scholar causes an unqualified person to engage improperly in allegorical interpretation, the scholar actually maintains their own assent to allegorical interpretations, which they are obligated to hold (even if

these allegorical interpretations are ultimately false). If we were to examine their cognitive states, then, we would find that there is no *kufr* at the level of belief. Thus, causal *kufr* obtains not because of a problematic theoretical belief on the part of the scholar, but because of a problematic practical action.

What exactly is causal responsibility here? How can a scholar be causally responsibly for someone of the rhetorical or dialectical class, say Zayd, committing cognitive *kufr*? Averroës does not fill in the details. I propose that we distinguish three interrelated senses of causal responsibility involved here: *evidential responsibility*, *epistemic responsibility*, and *moral responsibility*. By ‘evidential responsibility’ I mean responsibility for providing the evidence, on the basis of which the cognitive *kufr* obtains. By ‘epistemic responsibility’ I mean responsibility with respect to inference, justification, and understanding. Finally, by ‘moral responsibility’ I mean who should be blamed or even punished for the cognitive *kufr*.<sup>29</sup>

It seems that these three kinds of responsibility are jointly necessary and sufficient for a scholar to be causally responsible, in the fullest sense, for Zayd’s cognitive *kufr*. Evidential responsibility is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for being causally responsible for someone else’s cognitive *kufr*. The scholar must be connected to the allegorical interpretations to be held responsible for Zayd’s cognitive *kufr*. But this is not sufficient for causal *kufr* to obtain. Zayd can come across allegorical interpretations of a scholar, but for some reason choose to not engage in allegorical interpretation (see footnote 26). Epistemic responsibility is a necessary—and possibly sufficient—condition for being causally responsible for cognitive *kufr*. The relevant sense of epistemic responsibility for us here concerns whether some independent person can be held epistemically responsible for the formation of another person’s assent to allegorical interpretations. This might seem counterintuitive, for surely I alone am the source of my inferences, justifications, and understanding. But I believe such a scenario can obtain if one exerts epistemic influence on another person’s inferences, justifications, and ultimate understanding of allegorical interpretations. Finally, there is moral responsibility. It seems that moral responsibility is a necessary condition for causal responsibility, but it merely obtains in virtue of evidential responsibility and epistemic responsibility. That is, if one is evidentially and epistemically responsible for another person’s cognitive *kufr*, then one is necessarily morally responsible as well. To see how Averroës thinks that al-Ghazālī is responsible in these three senses we must turn to premise (2) of the master argument.

Premise (2) of the master argument states that “Al-Ghazālī expresses false allegorical interpretations to unqualified persons in the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*.” Averroës is clearly committed to this premise:

Allegorical interpretations, then, ought not to be expressed to the masses nor set down in rhetorical or dialectical books, that is, books containing arguments of these two sorts, as was done by.... (DT: 66; see also DT: 61)<sup>30</sup>  
Therefore, allegorical interpretations ought to be set down only in demonstrative books, because if they are in demonstrative books they are encountered by no one but men of the demonstrative class. But if they are set down in other than demonstrative books and one deals with them by poetical, rhetorical, or dialectical methods, as Abū Hāmid does, then he commits an offense against the Law and

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<sup>29</sup> On moral treatment of *kuffār*, see Griffel (2001) and Hoover (2009)

<sup>30</sup> Here, Averroës is explicitly referencing al-Ghazālī, as his full name is ‘Abū Hāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī’.

against philosophy, even though the fellow intended nothing but good. (DT: 61;  
see also DT: 66)

For Averroës, al-Ghazālī is clearly evidentially responsible for Zayd’s cognitive *kufṛ*. What is noteworthy, however, is how this evidence is expressed, as this reveals why al-Ghazālī is epistemically responsible. According to Averroës, the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* is not a demonstrative book, but a popular book,<sup>31</sup> because it discusses allegorical interpretations through rhetoric and dialectic.<sup>32</sup> Suppose Zayd, who picks up the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, is from the rhetorical class. This implies two things: (1) Zayd’s intellectual disposition is such that he will be swayed by rhetoric, and (2) Zayd should only assent to apparent meanings of scripture. Let us consider how local *kufṛ* would obtain for Zayd under the second possibility discussed above, namely, rejecting an apparent meaning and arming a misunderstood and unjustified allegorical meaning. Since the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* examines allegorical interpretations through rhetoric, Zayd should actually be able to follow much of al-Ghazālī’s argumentation. Zayd will make inferences that will lead him to believe, mistakenly, that he understands a particular allegorical interpretation and that he can prove it. Consequently, Zayd will abandon his assent to former apparent meanings, and now affirm a misunderstood and unjustified allegorical interpretation. This is local *kufṛ*. So, who is epistemically responsible for Zayd’s cognitive *kufṛ*, al-Ghazālī or Zayd? In an obvious sense, Zayd is epistemically responsible for the cognitive *kufṛ*, as he is the immediate cause of his own misunderstanding. However, Averroës would claim that the real culprit here is al-Ghazālī because he has put Zayd in a compromised epistemic position. Zayd would not have been epistemically compromised if al-Ghazālī had restricted his audience to the demonstrative class. Al-Ghazālī has put Zayd in a cognitive situation where he can follow al-Ghazālī’s rhetoric, and is now rejecting apparent meanings and replacing them with allegorical meanings. In this way, al-Ghazālī exerts epistemic influence on Zayd’s belief formation vis-à-vis his mode of presentation and authority as a scholar. Thus, al-Ghazālī has a share in the epistemic responsibility. Given that al-Ghazālī is evidentially and epistemically responsible for Zayd’s cognitive *kufṛ*, it follows that he is also

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<sup>31</sup> It is important to note that al-Ghazālī actually claims that he is engaging in demonstrative reasoning. Al-Ghazālī’s whole aim is to show that the philosopher’s demonstrations fail on their own terms, through using their own logical tools against them. He claims he “will dispute with them in this book in their language—I mean, their expressions in logic” (IP: 9). Averroës claims that despite al-Ghazālī’s intentions, al-Ghazālī failed to provide demonstrations, and is actually engaging in rhetoric and dialectic. For example, in response to al-Ghazālī’s objections to the first proof for the eternity of the world, Averroës writes: “this argument is sophistical” (II: 3). For al-Ghazālī’s views on demonstration, see Griffel (2016).

<sup>32</sup> It is not clear whether al-Ghazālī’s intended audience is the masses, as Averroës claims. In the Third Introduction to the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, al-Ghazālī seems to imply that his audience is anyone who thinks highly of al-Fārābī and Avicenna: “Let it be known [that] our objective is to alert those who think well of the philosophers and believe that their ways are free from contradiction by showing the [various] aspects of their incoherence” (IP: 7). This statement suggests that al-Ghazālī’s target audience are people who already have some familiarity with al-Fārābī and Avicenna’s works, which would presumably exclude the masses. That al-Ghazālī would not want laymen to engage the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* is suggested by the following statement in the *Deliverance from Error*: “the perusal of the philosophers’ books must be prevented on the score of the deceit and danger they contain” (DE: 70). This suggests that only the qualified student or scholar should engage the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, because only they can intellectually handle philosophy. As such, an available response to al-Ghazālī might be to argue that he never intended the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* to be read by the rhetorical class. If so, then Averroës’ *takfīr* would be misplaced.

morally responsible. Consequently, al-Ghazālī is causally responsible in the fullest sense for Zayd’s cognitive *kufr*, and commits causal *kufr*.<sup>33</sup>

Given premise (1) and premise (2) of the master argument, it follows conclusively that al-Ghazālī is a *kāfir*:

As for the man who expresses these allegories to unqualified persons, he is an unbeliever on account of his summoning people to unbelief. This is contrary to the summons of the Legislator, especially when they are false allegories concerning the principles of religion, as has happened in the case of a group of people of our time. For we have seen some of them thinking that they were being philosophic and that they perceived, with their remarkable wisdom, things that conflict with Scripture in every respect, that is [in passages] that do not admit of allegorical interpretation; and that it was obligatory to express these things to the masses. But by expressing those false beliefs to the masses, they have been a cause (*sababā*) of perdition to the masses and themselves, in this world and the next. (DT: 66)

The man who has been a “cause of perdition to the masses” here is clearly al-Ghazālī. It is surprising, however, that there is not a single line in the *Decisive Treatise* where Averroës explicitly says ‘al-Ghazālī is a *kāfir*’. If Averroës is committed to premises (1) and (2) of the master argument, then why does he not explicitly draw out the conclusion? My conjecture is that Averroës find himself in somewhat of a bind given his own commitment to allegorical interpretations being discussed exclusively in demonstrative books. Due to the nature of Averroës’ critique, it seems that the matter of al-Ghazālī’s *kufr* should only be discussed with the scholars—not the masses. However,

If it were not for the publicity given to the matter and to these questions that we have discussed, we should not have permitted ourselves to write a word on the subject; and we should not have had to make excuses for doing so to the interpretative scholars, because the proper place to discuss these questions is in demonstrative books. (DT: 62)

Since al-Ghazālī made public *takfīr* of al-Fārābī and Avicenna, Averroës finds it necessary to respond in a public work as well in order to clear the air. Yet, Averroës is still careful in concealing his considered position. Only those who are trained in logic will be able to draw out the conclusion of the master argument. Perhaps Averroës saw a danger in overtly making *takfīr* of al-Ghazālī. Al-Ghazālī was such a prominent and well-received Muslim scholar, that explicitly calling him a *kāfir* in a public work would possibly turn away the rhetorical and dialectical classes from Islam. But this is precisely Averroës’ problem with al-Ghazālī. Thus, Averroës treads lightly.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

In our epigraph, Averroës claims that “philosophy is the friend and milk-sister of religion” (DT: 70). Once again, Averroës is indicating the legal relationship between philosophy and religion. In

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<sup>33</sup> Causal *kufr* does not have to be committed intentionally. For Averroës, al-Ghazālī actually commits causal *kufr* unintentionally: “the fellow intended nothing but good” (DT: 61). But he had the opposite effect: “by this procedure he wanted to increase the number of learned men, but in fact he increased the number of the corrupted not of the learned!” (Ibid.).

<sup>34</sup> This raises an important question: since Averroës’ *takfīr* is a theoretical matter, does its truth depend on consensus? In other words, is Averroës’ *takfīr* tentative?

*sharī'a*, milk kinship (*riqā'a*) is established when non-biologically related infants are breastfed by the same wet nurse (Parkes 2005). In what sense, then, is philosophy the 'milk-sister' of religion? Philosophy and Islam are 'non-biologically related' in that they have different origins: the former originates in ancient Greece while the latter originates in the Arabian peninsula. Nonetheless, they have the same 'wet nurse' in that they are both nurtured by reason, or perhaps more specifically, the active intellect (*al-'aql al-fa'āl*).<sup>35</sup> Thus, they are family, or as Averroës puts it: "companions by nature and lovers by essence and instinct." Philosophy is essential to Islam because demonstrative proof is the path to unveiling the truth of theoretical matters in the Qur'ān. Conversely, Islam is essential to philosophy because it clarifies relevant practical matters, that is, it helps one cultivate the moral virtue necessary for philosophical inquiry.<sup>36</sup> Al-Ghazālī misses this point and "injures" philosophy, but more importantly, he injures the very thing he aimed to protect, namely, Islam.

Averroës was certainly justified in his concern that the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* would lead Muslims to "slander philosophy" (DT: 61), thus stifling philosophical and religious progress within the Muslim world. But perhaps Averroës went too far. He could have vindicated the status of philosophy and defended al-Fārābī and Avicenna without making *takfīr* of al-Ghazālī. Of course, Averroës is a Mālikī legal scholar, and his philosophical and legal case against al-Ghazālī must be taken seriously.<sup>37</sup> But given al-Ghazālī's established status within orthodox Islam, it is imperative to see whether al-Ghazālī can be defended against this charge. I briefly want to put pressure on the viability of causal *kufr*. The Qur'ān suggests that individuals alone are responsible for their actions:

If they say you are a liar, say, 'To me is my work and to you is your work. You have no responsibility (*barī'ūna*) for what I do and I have no responsibility (*barī*) for what you do.' (Q. 10:41; see also Q. 6:52)

Now consider the following verse, specifically about *kufr*:

Those who disbelieve (*kafara*) bear the consequences of their disbelief (*kufrihu*). (Q. 30:44, translation modified; see also Q. 17:15)

This verse seems to be a counterexample.<sup>38</sup> Even if Zayd is in some sense led to cognitive *kufr* by al-Ghazālī, the true cause of the cognitive *kufr* is Zayd, for he alone is epistemically responsible for his beliefs as a free epistemic agent. More work must be done to fill out the details here, but these kinds of verses might show that Averroës' account of causal *kufr* is problematic, and thus could get al-Ghazālī off the hook.

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<sup>35</sup> Broadly put, for the Islamic philosophers the active intellect is the giver of forms, and has an important role in both prophecy and philosophical reflection.

<sup>36</sup> For a brief account of how allegorical interpretation involves moral and spiritual exercises, see Azadpur (2011: 91).

<sup>37</sup> For an introduction to Averroës' legal work, see Dutton (1994).

<sup>38</sup> I say 'seems' because Averroës might say that although this verse impugns Zayd, it does not rule out that al-Ghazālī is responsible as well.



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